

The Elgin National Road Race

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Crown Point, Indiana, became the focal point for the first road race in the Midwest. On June 18, 1909, 50,000 people attended a 232 mile road course race. This first race in the Midwest was promoted by the Chicago Auto Club. The Crown Point race promoters had hoped to sell tickets to the race fans. Most fans sat on the lawn or in their own lawn chairs along the race course. Financial trouble and road conditions forced the race to move to a different location.

Elgin resident, Frank Wood, an auto dealer, convinced the Chicago Motor Club that a local course had many advantages over Crown Point, Indiana. One advantage for having a race course in Elgin, Illinois, would be having no crossroads or railroads. There also were no bad hills, and no towns to pass through.

The Chicago Motor Club was invited to Elgin to view the roads proposed by Frank Wood. A committee of local men formed the Elgin Automobile Club with a capital of \$20,000. A group of five men signed the incorporation papers for the Elgin Automobile Road Race Association on May 13, 1910. Stock in the corporation was issued and sold to help pay for the costs.

The Elgin Automobile Road Race Association made a deal with the local farmers that lived near the race course. If the farmer allowed his land to be used for the races, the farmer could sell tickets, concessions, and the lodging. Any money made was split in half with one half going to

the race association and the farmer keeping the other half. Late in August 1910, the Elgin Automobile Road Race Association prepared to run the first in a series of races on Elgin's west side. They signed for two days of racing.

Elgin hosted the race from 1910-1915 and again in 1919 and 1920. They had a the corners. In case of an accident, the flaggers warned the approaching drivers and rebirth for one year in 1933. The races were held in Elgin every August and drew huge crowds. Stores and factories closed during the races while local hotel rooms were reserved weeks in advance. The Kelley Hotel had a national reputation. During the Elgin Road Races, many outstanding people of the automobile industry stayed at this hotel.

Prior to race days, Elgin residents were in a state of high anticipation at the thought of seeing the world's best drivers take the grueling course. The wide-open roads were an attraction for drivers from around the country. The Elgin National Road Races were known for their tests of the skills of the drivers and the endurance of their cars. Three races for the Illinois, Kane County, and Fox River trophies were run one right after another on courses of different lengths.

The original drivers of the Elgin National Road Race traveled on an 8.5 mile track. The race course was an oiled, gravel track. The gravel roads were spread with an estimated 50,000 gallons of oil to keep the dust down. Elgin locals were invited to drive on the track to grind the oil and gravel together to make the track more solid.

Mechanics rode with the drivers because when the car broke down; the team had to know how to get back on the road. The mechanics were also responsible for pumping oil into the engine. Spare tires and tools were common accessories for motorists back then. "The question in the minds of all was how many of the mechanics would outlast the terrible grind and how many of the demon drivers would come out without injury," the *Elgin Courier News*, the local newspaper, reported.

Flaggers were necessary to help people off the track. The flaggers also stood at guided them around the accident.

The judges in the stands kept an accurate time (electrically) on every car for every lap. A pair of people was responsible for each car which was timed separately. The judges posted the times on a chalkboard.

Postcards were sent all over the country advertising the races. Winning races allowed car manufacturers to make promotional postcards. The car was always featured with the driver highlighted. Most postcards were real photos; however, humorous postcards were the popular souvenirs of the day. Many of the drawings showed the local people of Elgin as farmers. The farmers sat on fences watching the road race. Promotional brochures contained printed routes to the race site.

The Elgin economy grew largely because the drivers and their race teams bought equipment for their cars from local stores. Most racers came because of the Elgin National Cup. The trophy

was said to have been designed by Tiffany's of New York and valued at \$4,500. The solid silver trophy is 44 inches high and weighs 40 pounds. Today, it is valued at \$100,000. The trophy was custom made and donated by the Elgin National Watch company. In addition to the trophy, the winner got \$1,000, second place received \$300, and third place received \$200.

The Elgin Road Races were first held in 1910. Judges, stands, and bleachers were erected and history was made when at least 125,000 spectators attended the two-day event beginning on August 26, 1910. Drivers were sent off separately from the starting line at 15 second intervals. When all of the entrants of the first race were sent off, those of the second race would be sent off the same way and the same in the third section. They had three races going on the same track at the same time for as long as it took to complete the race.

Maurice Dyer, president of the Model T Club of Elgin, related that the Road Race plaque was erected in 1970 by the Elgin Area Historical Society and the Chicago Motor Club in commemoration of the race. Ralph Mulford returned to Elgin for the commemoration in 1970. Today, a plaque is mounted near the entrance of the old Fire Station 4 on Larkin Ave. in Elgin, Illinois. It marks a point on the course on which the drivers contributed significantly to the engineering of the modern automobile. It also provided the development for the design of modern cars. The road race is remembered every year with a car show sponsored by the Fox Valley Chapter of the Model T Ford Club.

The Elgin National Road Race gave a boost to the Elgin economy. Drivers, spectators, and workers were quite proud of the efforts that everyone participated in such grand events. Ralph DePalma was the most frequent participant in the Elgin Road Races. He won three times in the main event, more than any other driver.

The famous Barney Oldfield had a reputation as the fastest driver, driving Henry Ford's speedster to 60 m.p.h. in the 1910 race. This straight line speed did not prepare him for the road race, and he never won in Elgin. Spencer Wishart was a popular 22-year-old millionaire who loved to race. He participated in the Elgin races until his death in the 1914 race. Throughout its history, the race claimed five lives, three in 1911 and two in 1914.

Fast cars, the lack of crowd protection, public complaints concerning road closings, and the opening of oval tracks specifically designed for racing led to the downfall of the Elgin races. Also, the races did not continue because of tight turns, drivers did not want to return, cars traveled too fast for road conditions, and the overall safety of everyone was in question. Throughout the racing years, it helped Elgin and car technology increase its importance. It made Elgin the racing capital of the world in the early part of the Twentieth century. [From E. C. Alft, Elgin; William E. Bennett, Elgin, Illinois "Wish You Were Here;" J. C. Burton, "Stutz Sweeps Card at Elgin," Motor Age Magazine (1915); The Courier News, Aug. 4, 1991, Merrill, Mar. 14, 2001; *The Daily Herald* (Aug. 19, 2002); Jim and Wynette Edwards, Elgin, Illinois; Elizabeth Marston, (Oct. 24, 2002), Elgin Road Race Scrapbook (Elgin Area Historical Museum, Elgin,

Illinois); The Story of the Elgin Road Races: The Elgin Road Races Sixtieth Anniversary
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